

The prospect of wildlife tourism

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Abstract: The paper extends an overview of the worldwide development of wildlife tourism, introduced the conception of wildlife tourism and its components, and analyzed the development of international wildlife tourism and its international trends. The sustainability of wildlife tourism, the protection of wildlife habitat, as well as the possible impacts of wildlife tourism development in China were discussed.

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Tourism is classically regarded as traveling for recreation although this definition has been expanded in recent years to include any travel outside of one's normal working or living area (Britles *et al.* 2001). Wealthy people have always traveled to distant parts of the world, not incidentally to some other purpose, but as an end in itself: to see great buildings or other works of art; to learn new languages; or to taste new cuisines and also to see characteristic wildlife (including animals and plants). Organized tourism is now a major industry around the world. Many national economies are now heavily reliant on tourism. According to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), tourism worldwide generates either directly or indirectly 11% of GDP, 200 million jobs and either percent of employment (WTTC 2000). More than 660 million people spent at least one night in a foreign country in 1999 and this group of international tourists spent more than US\$453 billion dollars while traveling. The World Tourism Organization (WTO) predicts that annual growth for international tourism over the next twenty years will be approximately four per cent with the number of international travelers reaching one billion per year by 2010 and more than 1.6 billion by 2020.

Wildlife tourism and its components

Wildlife tourism is tourism based on encounters with non-domesticated (non-human) animals in either their natural environment or in captivity. It includes both so-called non-consumptive forms of wildlife tourism, such as viewing, photography and feeding; and consumptive forms, such as hunting and recreational fishing (Conway 1995).

Technically, wildlife includes both fauna and flora, but here we restrict it to fauna (animals), as usually understood in common usage and by the tourism industry. The term 'animal' is defined in the biological sense to mean any

member of the Kingdom Animalia (except humans), and thus includes not only land-dwelling vertebrates such as mammals and birds, but also aquatic vertebrates that usually live in the sea or inland waters, such as platypus, frogs, fish and turtles. It also includes invertebrates such as glow worms, butterflies, corals and starfish.

Wildlife tourism overlaps with nature-based tourism, special interest tourism and eco-tourism. The extent of the overlap depends on exactly how these terms are defined. Most wildlife tourism is a subset of nature-based tourism, in that animals are a subset of nature. However, zoos and other attractions where wildlife are kept in captivity are often not seen as nature-based tourism, though clearly they are based on a component of nature. Wildlife tourism that occurs within the context of nature-based activities that provide environmental interpretation and adopt environmentally responsible practices would generally be considered eco-tourism. In cases where a tourist travels to a particular destination primarily for the purpose of having a wildlife experience, then wildlife tourism can be seen as a form of special interest tourism. However, for most wildlife tourism activities, motivations will differ among visitors.

International wildlife tourism

Wildlife viewing has been identified as the activity forecast to have strong potential within the adventure travel sector in the world. Wildlife tourism globally attracts very large numbers of tourists, though there are no reliable global estimates for this sector as a whole.

Judging by statistics available for North America, many millions more participate in other forms of viewing of free-ranging animals. Probably even greater numbers of people participate in viewing animals in zoos, with an estimated 600 million visitors annually. However, it is not clear in either case what proportion of these visitors are tourists. In addition, millions of people worldwide participate in hunting tourism (Bauer and Giles 2001), and a further unknown, but very large number of people participates in fishing tourism. Consequently, wildlife tourism generates very large financial revenues on a global scale, which al-

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most a decade ago were estimated as US\$47-\$155 billion annually.

Wildlife viewing in Canada and a number of American states is said to be 'a multi-million dollar industry'. Hunting, although having a lower public profile than wildlife viewing, involves a large proportion of 'tourists' as defined here, and is reported to be a multi-billion dollar industry within the United States alone. (Bauer and Giles 2001). In the United Kingdom, enjoyment of wildlife was found by one survey to be a priority for 90% of holidaymakers (Roe *et al.* 1997). Wildlife is reported to be a prime attraction for 32% of international tourists to Australia and 80% of international tourists to Kenya and Zimbabwe (Gray 2004). These examples illustrate that at least some forms of wildlife tourism are economically important in some parts of the world.

Trends in wildlife tourism

Increased levels of participation or interest in some types of wildlife tourism

There are frequent claims in the literature that tourist demand for, and interest in, opportunities to see and interact with wildlife is growing at a rapid rate. However, the evidence for such claims is difficult to assess as tourists to the designated wildlife areas is monitored reliably only in some countries. But statistics from the United States indicated that viewing of free-ranging wildlife in North America at least in some sub-sectors may have increased in recent decades.

Increased specialization of wildlife tourism

There is some evidence to suggest that there has been an increase in the level of specialization of wildlife watchers over recent years. Although wildlife watchers may be becoming more specialized in their interest and skills, they also have general interest in visiting and attending less specialized activities such as visit to captive settings.

Increased consideration of animal welfare issues

The early days of wildlife tourism were comprised mainly of trophy hunting and of zoos with animals exhibited in small, bare cages. Recent decade have witnessed a shift in prevalent public values within more developed countries from a dominant and utilitarian attitude to one referred to as humanistic and moralistic, in which animals are valued more highly alive than dead. This change in attitude has been accompanied by increasing public concern about animal welfare issues. These trends also seem to apply to China.

Increased environmental awareness

Growing interest in, and concern for the natural environment (include wildlife) among residents of more developed countries has apparently contributed greatly to increased demand for tourism in viewing animals within their natural environment (Shackly 1996). On the one hand, this

has ironically led to increased visitation pressures on some sensitive natural areas and wildlife species. On the other hand, it is often reported that this growing awareness has meant that tourists are increasingly concerned that their tourism activities do not damage the natural environment, and are increasingly motivated to contribute to conservation (e.g. participating in conservation holidays, or making donations to wildlife conservation). Perhaps because people emphasize more strongly with animals than they do with the natural environment as a whole, this trend seems to be particularly apparent with wildlife tourism.

Increased recognition of synergies between wildlife tourism and conservation

Until the last decade or so, the dominant conservation philosophy has been to rely principally on legally protected areas (which occupy only a small proportion of the earth's surface) for wildlife conservation. There has more recently been a progressive recognition that if conservation is to be successful in the long term, it must be promoted on the other lands, and must be integrated with the realities of modern economics and meeting people's needs. Governments and major international conservation organizations now widely support the view that well-managed nature-based tourism is one form of land use that can meet these joint goals. In areas where suitable wildlife exists, development of tourism based on wildlife viewing or consumption can (at least in theory) provide economic incentives and revenue for conservation of natural habitats and wildlife (Higginbottom *et al.* 2001)³.

It is clear that opportunities to see wildlife are a major component of both international and domestic travel. It is important and to be hoped that China is aware of and responds which appropriate to the trends mentioned above. Hopefully, China tends to maximize its competitive advantages in the international tourism market, such as Tibet.

The sustainability of wildlife tourism

The Brundtland Report (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987) defined sustainable development as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. This definition implies that development needs to use resources at a rate and in a way that will allow future generations to do the same. Development of tourism activities must be consistent with the principles of sustainability. Wildlife tourism should also have relation to the sustainable development and management of wildlife tourism industry. ESD Working Group (1991) defined sustainable tourism as tourism that:

- is concerned the quality of experience offered to visitors;
- provides economic returns to host communities;
- ensures cultural integrity and social cohesion of host communities;
- protects biological diversity;

- maintains ecological systems;
- operates within the limits of the resources available;
- maintains the full range of opportunities within and across generations;
- is based upon activities or designs which reflect the character of the region; and
- allows visitors to gain an understanding of the destination and encourages them to be concerned about, and protective of, the destination.

Aspects of sustainability that are most relevant for wildlife tourism are financial viability, visitor satisfaction, visitor education, and impacts of tourism on wildlife and habitats.

The problem then becomes what level and kind of activity will result in a sustainable wildlife tourism industry. Sustainability is difficult to measure. Physical, economic and social components of sustainability need to be considered, as well as any trade-offs between these. For example, activities that lead to an economic benefit may contribute to degradation of the physical environment. Moreover, social costs may be accepted by host communities where the economic benefits are perceived to outweigh the costs. Concepts such as carrying capacity, limits of acceptable change (LAC) and the precautionary principle are relevant to determining a sustainable level of activity for wildlife tourism activities. The carrying capacity concept as it relates to wildlife tourism refers to the maximum level of activity that will not cause 'unacceptable impacts' on wildlife species, wildlife habitats and host communities. The LAC approach is based on the premise that change is evitable, but that it is important to decide just how much change is acceptable. Alternatively, the precautionary principle focuses on preventing potential impacts through the implementation of control measures. There are proponents for each of these management concepts, so each needs to be considered when determining what level of activity will result in the sustainable development and management of wildlife tourism.

In the future, tourism operators will need to adopt best practice environmental management processes that will contribute to sustainability (Wang *et al.* 2004). It is possible that managers of tourism organizations in the future will be required to have an environmental skill base, enabling them to determine sustainability indicators and conduct evaluation processes. A significantly different management style may emerge as the wildlife tourism industry comes to terms with the requirements of sustainable development practices.

Furthermore, adopting the concept of sustainability will require that wildlife tourism development is integrated into national, regional and local strategic planning frameworks. Planning will be required to ensure that wildlife resources are not over-exploited, that natural environments are protected and that tourism provides real benefits to local host communities. Host communities are often the basis of the tourism enterprise, therefore local people should be involved and included in planning and implementation, and

their cultures and traditions need to be respected. The development and management policies adopted in the future need to reflect these environmental and cultural concerns so that sustainability can be achieved.

Wildlife tourism in China

Wildlife oriented tourism is estimated to generate an annual revenue of US\$47-\$155 billion (Wang *et al.* 2004). Further, because wildlife are often most abundant far from major urban development, wildlife tourism can provide a much needed boost to depressed economies in rural areas, an issue particularly relevant to China. China has more unique fauna than other major tourist destinations in the world (Dong 2004). Panda is well known internationally as interesting oddities and possess a cute appeal. There are numerous other fascinating and attractive wildlife species which are poorly known by the Chinese public, let alone the international community (Zhang 2004). The absence of dangerous predators in most of the country means that tourists can safely enjoy natural wildlife habitats, like the monkeys. However, the opportunities for tourists to interact with free-ranging Chinese wildlife are limited compared with those in some overseas destinations (Liang 2004). Some international models of wildlife tourism (e.g. African style safaris) could potentially be adapted for Chinese conditions, but have not been systematically explored. With the development of the society, both government and the public will pay much attention to the wildlife resources. Hope one day, through building up a consummate wildlife tourism system, we can enjoy the wildlife and also protect them.

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